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THE ETHICS OF TRILBY: WITH A SUPPLEMENTAL NOTE ON SPIRITUAL AFFINITY: BY ISAAC HULL PLATT

*Very many thanks for your kind letter, and also for "The Ethics of Trilby," which gave me great encouragement and delight, and for which I am deeply obliged to you.*

GEORGE DU MAURIER TO ISAAC HULL PLATT, FEBRUARY 3, 1895

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## THE ETHICS OF TRILBY

"There are not a few people who will remember the first half of 1894, not for the hard times, nor for the yacht races, nor any other thing of public interest or private concern, so much as for the pleasure they had in reading 'Trilby.' "

So says Margaret Sangster in one of the ablest reviews of this remarkable book. Doubtless the great interest excited by "Trilby" is in no small measure due to the author's happy way of telling his story. The easy, chatty, rollicking, seemingly careless style has a wonderful fascination. Not but that the story has sadness enough, but, as the reviewer in the *Independent* says, "even when the author weeps with his weepers his tears seem as the April scuds, with sunshine on their wings."

But beyond this matter of style there is a deeper meaning, and the book has touched and set vibrating a chord deep in the human heart. The story is a tragedy, but with the tragedy there is such a spirit of hope and faith and joyousness, such an all-persuading optimism, that the reader, having followed the hero and heroine through their sorrows even to death, closes the book with a sense of tender wonderment and an indescribable feeling that back of and beneath all the pain and sin and wretchedness there are joy and right in the inherencies of things. In language at times almost flippant the author contrives, with great dramatic power, to convey a deep ethical meaning. He never preaches ;

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but mere preaching falls as far short of the moral significance of this work as a modern orthodox sermon does to the story of the Magdalen.

The ethical question in regard to the story turns mainly on the character of Trilby herself.

“She had all the virtues but one ; but the virtue she lacked was the very one that plays the title role and gives its generic name to all the rest of that goodly company. Whether it be an aggravation of her misdeeds or an extenuating circumstance, no pressure of want, no temptations of greed or vanity had ever been factors in urging Trilby in her downward career after her first false step in that direction—the result of ignorance, bad advice (from her mother, of all people in the world), and base betrayal. She might have lived in guilty splendor, had she chosen, but her wants were few. She had no vanity, and her tastes were of the simplest, and she earned enough to gratify them and to spare. . . . Indeed, she might almost be said to possess a virginal heart, so little did she know of love’s heart-aches and raptures and torments and clings and jealousies.”

It is her association with the “three clean young Englishmen,” whose life of chivalrous comradeship so charms us all, that leads her to a sense of shame. It has been urged that her repentance was not very bitter ; but what matters it ? It was sincere, for it led her to a better life—a more serious realization of life.

In renouncing her lover for what she believes to be his good she performs an act of heroic self-sacrifice. Years after, in the face of approaching death, when she reviews her life in the conversation with Mrs. Bagot, she mentions, as the lowest and meanest thing she ever did—the one that had caused her the bitterest remorse—that once, on a Palm Sunday, in order to further her

own enjoyment of the day, she broke her promise to her little brother.

“It was six or seven years ago, and I really believe I have thought of it almost every day, and sometimes in the middle of the night! And when Jeannot was dying, and when he was dead—the remembrance of that Palm Sunday!” “O Trilby, what nonsense!” replied the good orthodox Mrs. Bagot; “*that’s* nothing—putting off a small child! I’m thinking of far worse things—when you were in the Latin Quarter, you know—sitting to painters and sculptors—surely, so attractive as you are—” “Oh! yes—I know what you mean—it was horrid, and I was frightfully ashamed of myself; and it wasn’t amusing a bit; *nothing* was, until I met your son and Taffy and dear Sandy McAlister! But then it wasn’t deceiving or disappointing anybody or hurting their feelings—it was only hurting myself!”

Mrs. Bagot wishes Trilby to see a clergyman and receive the comforts of religion, but Trilby does not feel the need of them. She is not afraid to die. Her father had told her there would be no hell for any of us, except what we make for ourselves and each other down here. He told her to be good and not to mind what priests and clergymen said. He had been a clergyman himself and knew all about it, Trilby said. He told her that God would make it all right for us somehow, in the end—for all of us—“and that seems sensible, *doesn’t* it?”

It is doubtful if this book was written with a conscious ethical purpose. I am inclined to believe that Du Maurier sought rather to depict certain phases of life as he saw them in the rosy light of his own buoyant nature: the free and generous life of Bohemia as opposed to the stupid and selfish life of respectability; the love of comrades, and warm-hearted human kindness of sometimes

erring men and women. But its ethical significance is none the less (rather more), considered as a reflex of a generous human soul, than if it were written with a distinct didactic purpose.

All things considered, it is rather surprising, in view of the great number who have read the book, with its unconventional ethics, and the amount of comment it has excited, that so little has been found to say against it from a moral point of view. And this is encouraging as a sign of the times. Probably the best presentation of the adverse criticism is the editorial in the *Outlook* for September 22. After highly praising the work, considered as an artistic production, the writer considers the question: "Is 'Trilby' a moral story?" and to this gives a negative reply in this wise:

"The net result is not a noble note in honor of feminine chastity; rather the reverse. What the 'Scarlet Letter' treats as a sacrilege, in the very spirit of Paul himself, this story treats as a fault easily condoned, almost overlooked. The drawing of Trilby's character is morally untrue. In life innocence is not retained after virtue is lost; and character drawing which is morally untrue is morally unwholesome. The story of 'Trilby' is ancient Gnosticism done into modern dramatic form—the story of a pure soul untainted by a polluted life—and Gnosticism is false. To the question, then, 'Is "Trilby" a moral story?' we reply in the negative. Its moral standard is a purely conventional one—that of the social code of honor. The eternal sanctions of righteousness, which are never ignored in the greatest works of the greatest artists, are wholly lacking. Religion is never referred to except in its most conventional forms, and then only to be satirized; perhaps we should say travestied. It is true the story exalts all the social virtues except one. But for unchastity in woman it inspires rather the con-



donation which comes of comparative indifference, than the forgiveness which comes of a pure and pitying love."

If the expression "innocence is not retained after virtue is lost," means anything beyond a stupid truism, it means that the particular error of which Trilby was guilty is of a nature so debasing that by it the very moral life of the soul is destroyed. From it there can be no repentance; the very possibility of moral integrity is annihilated. Such a doctrine is uncharitable, inhuman, cruel. It is strange indeed that it should be held by adherents to the religion whose sacred book contains the sweet story of the Magdalen! "Neither do I condemn thee; go and sin no more," were the words of the man they worship as a god, and one who perhaps saw deeper into the strength and weakness of the human soul than any before or since. These were words addressed to a woman whose error was Trilby's error. If "Trilby" is immoral, the gospel attributed to St. John is immoral. This may prove nothing to us, but should give them pause. They should be the last to condemn an ethical position which is but the echo of that taken by him whom they hail as the divine savior of mankind.

There are, however, grounds which, if not higher, at least appeal more directly to people of liberal views, upon which I would defend the ethics of "Trilby," the book, and the character of Trilby the woman. In the first place, it is hard to determine in what respect Trilby's particular sin differed from other sin in its corrupting influence. Reverse the case in regard to sex. Would any one allege that a story in which a man who had been guilty of unchastity in early life should be depicted as brave, generous, humane, self-sacrificing, is immoral? Mani-

testly, if such an allegation could be justly made, such a man, in real life, who should exhibit these admirable qualities, would be doubly reprehensible : to furnish a proper example and adorn a moral tale he should continue in a downward course until he reached the gallows, or at least an ignominious grave at the end of some dishonorable career. If this is not true for a man, why for a woman ? In what does the fault differ ? Abstractly, not at all. Concretely, it presents a more serious menace to certain established conventions of society as at present constituted. It is a greater offense against respectability, and, to those who worship respectability as their Holy Ghost, it is the unpardonable sin. Moreover, woman, in history, having occupied a subordinate position to man, it has been regarded as her duty to her lord and master so to conduct herself as best to meet with his approval and best to minister to him ; while man, not being under corresponding obligations to woman, was naturally left more free. I am not saying that, historically speaking, this has not been right. I believe that if it had not been right it would not have been, and probably it has been a factor in the development of certain admirable traits of female character. But the freedom of woman cannot be attained until this invidious distinction has ceased to exist.

But waiving any question of the relative turpitude of the sin, what is sin ? It is such a course of conduct as results from allowing a temporary and trivial benefit to overpower a more remote but greater benefit. It is shortsightedness. Considered as a positive entity, it is a force the resistance to which develops character, strengthens and broadens the soul, just as physical exer-

cise—the resistance to material forces—develops the muscles, strengthens and broadens the body. “What is this blurt about virtue and about vice? Evil propels me and the reform of evil propels me.” Without evil there could be no virtue—only innocence; no development of character—only stagnation.

Mr. Chadwick writes (and he is to be congratulated on his courage in so writing) :

“There is good morality in the teaching that such a fault as Trilby’s, if not allied to virtue, is not foreign to it altogether; it is so frequently, so generally, the fault of liberal, trusting natures, and is therefore deserving of a hundred times more pity than it commonly receives.”

The *Outlook* editorial is a manifest begging of the whole question. The distinction attempted to be drawn between the social code of honor and the code of ethics (presumably his own), which the writer considers to be based upon “the eternal sanctions of righteousness,” is purely artificial. All codes, so far as they are right, are based upon the eternal sanctions of righteousness, and all are imperfect. All have grown up from the ceaseless struggle of the human soul toward the light. None can be checked off against the eternal sanctions of righteousness in this fashion. The last appeal open to each of us is his own conscience. One ethical code condemns unchastity in woman (using the word in its most conventional sense) as a sin past forgiveness, while it almost ignores the question whether there be such a sin for man. The other accords to truth and honor the highest places among the virtues. What claim has the former rather than the latter code to rest upon the “eternal sanctions”?

“To think of other people before myself and never



to tell lies or be afraid''—this was Trilby's code, and she lived it. This is the code which the *Outlook*, speaking for orthodox pharisaism, condemns as a purely conventional standard, and says has not the "eternal sanctions of righteousness!"

"Character drawing," the reviewer says, "which is morally untrue is morally unwholesome." Of course. But this is begging the question again. The question is, is the character of Trilby morally untrue? In the story we have the record of a woman, born and growing up amid evil influences, temporarily yielding to them; struggling, and rising above them; repenting of her errors in the true sense, which means, not to weep and feel remorse, but to renounce them and lead a better life; in her developed character—developed through the struggle with evil—exhibiting patience, self-control, self-sacrifice, courage, dignity and unswerving fidelity. To those who consider the depiction of this character immoral it might be well to call attention to another and a very old story, which perhaps they might call immoral if it were new—the story of the Pharisee and the publican who went up to the temple to pray, and the publican went down to his house justified rather than the other.

The difficulty that I have found in approaching the discussion of this subject is its intangibility. A story like this presents certain aspects of human life in a way to suggest thought hard to reduce to precept and formula, and this very subtlety constitutes its strength. The attempt to reduce it to bald statement is like trying to describe the perfume of a flower. It suggests "thoughts that will not wear the yoke of words."

The ethics of "Trilby" appears not so much in any



definite statement or proposition as in the general sentiment, feeling, atmosphere, and these are wholesome, sound and pure.

It is unnecessary to discuss the exact relative importance of Trilby's faults as compared with other faults. Enough that she rose above them. Enough that she demonstrated the inherent dignity, honor, truthfulness—yes, purity of her soul. Her path may at one time have been through bogs and fens, but it passed on and by devious ways reached at last the sweet, flowery, wholesome uplands.

Her career is an epitome of the ever-advancing struggle of humanity. Strengthened by evil overcome; broadened by experience of life; purified by sorrow bravely met—it rises triumphant over evil, using that very evil as an aid in its upward course.

I am not very familiar with the doctrines of the ancient Gnostics; but if Gnosticism meant that no sin can so pollute the soul as to inhibit it from rising on stepping-stones of its dead self to higher things, then I believe that not only is it not false, but that it implies one of the eternal verities.

The reviewer in *Unity* says: "The new theology is spreading, but with it is going an ethics which threatens the life and purity of our American homes."

Well, if the new theology is spreading, new ethics must of necessity go with it. It is possible that conventional ethics needs revising. It may come to be regarded as not altogether immoral to hold that that which is impure is not made pure by a sacerdotal function, and that true sexual kinship is not determined by a particular form of ecclesiastical or civil marriage, but by spiritual

affinities inherent in the soul. It may at some future time be considered that the lapse of a woman from conventional virtue is no more an unpardonable sin than the selling of herself, body and soul, for lucre or a title. The doctrine may be accepted that an offense against respectability is no worse than an offense against human nature. It even may be that a fallen woman may be given a chance to redeem herself, and yet the life and purity of our American homes survive.

The new theology, whatever else it may mean, must involve the entire abandonment of the hateful idea of a vengeful, implacable deity, and it will imply an ethics which will admit of the possibility of the advancement of the most degraded ; will assert the infinite capacity of development in the human soul ; will deny most strenuously the imagined impurity of the human body or any of its parts or functions. "God at last is responsible for all of us," Trilby's father taught her. This, to me, is the ethics of "Trilby."

Du Maurier has done a great and brave work. We might say of him, as has been said of the ideal poet : "Now he has passed that way, see after him. There is not left any vestige of despair or misanthropy or cunning or exclusiveness, or the delusion of hell or the necessity of hell—and no man thenceforward shall be degraded for ignorance or weakness or sin."

## NOTE ON SPIRITUAL AFFINITY

In the discussion following the reading of the foregoing paper before the "Fellowship for Ethical Research" considerable difference was developed regarding the exact meaning of "spiritual affinity" and its bearing upon "sexual kinship."

Now Stormouth's dictionary defines spiritual as "not gross, not material, possessing the nature or qualities of a spiritual being, pure, holy." This definition will serve our purpose as well as any.

Without entering into a discussion as to the nature of man, or of the nature of spirit or soul, all will, I suppose, agree that some functions and attributes of humanity are less material, less gross, more ethereal, than others: for instance, thought than digestion, love than muscular action. The question whether the spiritual aspect of man's nature is separable from the material is irrelevant to the question. It is enough that man presents these two sides to his nature, and the higher or more intangible side let us agree to call the spiritual side. The impelling motives to the sex relation in mankind may be roughly enumerated, proceeding from lowest to highest, as follows :

1st. The hope of attainment of some extraneous reward or benefit, as money, position, title, social esteem, gratification or ambition. This leads to prostitution and to "*marriages de convenance*," which, while they differ in dignity and respectability, are essentially of like nature.

2d. Simple, gross, animal desire, having reference to persons of the opposite sex almost indiscriminately, or with regard only to their physical attractions.



3d. Friendship, or passing fondness for a person of the opposite sex, founded upon qualities inherent in that other person, but not exclusive of a like feeling for other individuals.

4th. Romantic love, a feeling of intense attraction for the other, partly physical, partly intellectual or spiritual, and, while it lasts, in its nature exclusive of like feelings for others.

5th. A still more elevated, refined and spiritual sentiment, best expressed in the beautiful opening sentence of Edward Carpenter's essay on "Marriage :—" "Of the great mystery of human love, and that most intimate relation of two souls to each other—perhaps the firmest, most basic and indissoluble fact that we know ; of that strange sense—often, perhaps generally, instantaneous—of long precedent familiarity and kinship ; that deep reliance and acceptance of another in his or her entirety ; of the tremendous strength of the chain which thus at times will bind two hearts in lifelong dedication and devotion, persuading and indeed not seldom compelling the persons concerned to the sacrifice of some of the other elements of their lives and characters ; and withal of a certain inscrutable veiledness from each other which so frequently accompanies the relation of the opposite sexes, and which forms at once the abiding charm and the pain—sometimes the tragedy—of their union ; of this palpitating, winged, living thing, which we may perhaps call the real marriage, I would say but little ; for, indeed, it is only fitting or possible to speak of it by indirect language and suggestion, nor may we venture to rudely drag it from its sanctuary into the gaze of common light."



These different motives and relations doubtless overlap and blend, the second, for instance, being an element underlying the higher ; and, moreover, they are individual cases modified and overruled by extraneous influences such as real or fancied duties and obligations to others.

It does not follow that any one of these impulses is necessarily and inherently wrong at all times and all places. My contention is that the purity and elevatedness rises with the character of the impulses, and that this constitutes the "spiritual affinity." Doubtless not every nature is capable, in its present stage of evolution, at least, of reaching spiritual heights. To such as are not, of course, the best they can do is, for the moment, right for them.

As for an ecclesiastical or civil ceremony, I fail to see that it contributes anything to the purity or spirituality of the relation, or that it has any value beyond the conventional one of serving as a record of the social status.

The sanction of right is happiness. I can conceive of no better, no nobler, no other ; but the trivial happiness of the moment should often be subordinated to the deeper, purer, more spiritual and enduring happiness of the future, and to understand and do this is righteousness.

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